

Holding onto Ambedkar: The emergence of BAPSA and the challenge to Left and Right

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Shabana Ali with her Central Panel

By Abhay Kumar for TwoCircles.net

Hundreds of students cheered and clapped when a senior activist of the Ambedkarite students' organisation BAPSA (Birsa Ambedkar Phule Students' Association) called upon Shabana Ali to address the gathering. PhD scholar at Arts and Aesthetics centre, 28-year old Shabana is BAPSA's presidential candidate and seen as one of the frontrunners in JNU Students Union (JNUSU) Elections 2017. The site of the gathering was JNU's Chandrabhaga Hostel where BAPSA's mashal juloos (torchlight procession) called "Oppressed Unity March" terminated on the late Sunday night. Taking out procession days before the polls is a routine event for all the major students' organisations. The usual route of the march has been from the famous Ganga Dhaba to Chandrabhaga Hostel. Situated close to the north-gate, Ganga Dhaba is the oldest food stall on the campus and an inseparable part of JNU's political culture, which wakes up at the late afternoon and remains awake till the wee hours, serving students tea, samosa, paratha etc. By holding out procession amid slogans, students' organisations attempt to animate their cadres and supporters, "woo" new voters but most importantly, exhibit their strength to opponents.

Clad in black salwar and yellowish kurti with a blue scarf around her neck, Shabana came forward and began her speech. Her round face was calm and big eyes sparked in confidence. As she had raised slogans in the march earlier and spent the past few days talking to students about BAPSA's ideology and agendas, her voice had turned hoarse. Her left hand was on her back and the right hand was in front and moved as she spoke. "We will give a strong reply to the ABVP [RSS's student-wing]". She came down heavily on the Right but she did not spare the Left either: "I condemned feudal, patriarchal, and Brahminical attitude of an AISA activist and demand a "public apology". In her speech, she referred to a recent incident in which a male-AISA activist allegedly misbehaved with a BAPSA female activist and poured hot tea over her. AISA, arguably the strongest Left organisation of the campus, is the student-wing of CPI-ML-Liberation, one of the largest factions of the original Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) that mobilised peasants to lead an armed revolution in the early 1970s, better known as Naxalbari Movement. But with the passage of time, the CPI-ML (Liberation) diluted much of

its revolutionary ideology and entered the electoral arena that they themselves had once dismissed.

In her speech too, she underscored the need to achieve such unity by going beyond the “binary” of the Left and the Right. However, she was careful to refute the charge of its detractors that BAPSA is a “sectarian” organisation and it is against people born in particular castes. While making an appeal to all the students to get associated with BAPSA, she said, “Please come to us and do criticize us [when we go wrong].” Other key issues that she raised during her speech included waging struggles for social justice and dignity as well as removing institutional discrimination. Moreover, the issues of Rohith Vemula and Najeeb were also highlighted. Vemula was the PhD student of Hyderabad Central University and activist of the Ambedkar Students’ Association whose suicide on January 17, 2016 sparked a nation-wide protest against the institutional discrimination against the marginalized sections. Najeeb, on the other hand, post-graduate student of JNU, had gone missing a year ago after the ABVP students allegedly beat him up last year. The incident of assault on Najeeb has instilled a deep sense of fear among the minority students about their safety and security. The struggles around the issues of Vemula and Najeeb have left a profound impact on Shabana.

Since its inception on November 14, 2014, BAPSA’s ideology is to forge a unity of the oppressed in order to establish a society based on the principles of equality, dignity, fraternity and justice. A recent BAPSA’s pamphlet reiterates its ideology, “BAPSA is an independent Ambedkarite student organisation which was formed by the students from the most marginalised and oppressed backgrounds (socially, economically, politically, culturally and historically) to fight against Brahminism and Capitalism with the objective of establishing a society based on EQUALITY, DIGNITY, LIBERTY, FRATERNITY, and JUSTICE, free from oppression on the basis of caste, class, race, gender, social position, religion, region, language and so on. BAPSA considers Brahminical Nationalism (created by Congress and RSS under Gandhi, Nehru, Golwalkar, Savarkar, Tilak and so on) as one among the various ways to perpetuate the old system of exploitation of the marginalised communities in India. We believe in the idea of Oppressed Bahujan Nationalism/Internationalism. The primary task of BAPSA is to UNITE all the socially deprived, marginalised, oppressed students in order to FIGHT against Brahminism or Hindutva Fascism”.

Among other agendas, BAPSA is trying to break the “the binary” of the Left and the Right and create an “alternative” space for itself. Its slogan Lal bhawga ek hai, sare comrade fake hain— [The red (standing for the Left) and the saffron (standing for the Right) are the same and all the comrades are fake]—often leaves the Left activists embarrassed. Historically, the Ambedkarite organisations have both “friendly” and “antagonistic” relations with Leftist/Communist organisations. Ambedkar himself led several movements in alliance with the communists but he attacked them on several occasions for not talking caste question centrally. The Dalit Panthers’ manifesto of the early 1970s (which radically defined Dalits being “members of Scheduled Castes and Tribes, Neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion”) called “true” Left parties as their friends (“Left parties that are Left in a true sense”) but vehemently criticized the parliamentary Left for having grown “bankrupt”.

Left-organisations like AISF (CPI’s student-wing), SFI (CPI-M’s student-wing), AISA and DSU (radical Left student organisation) and others have been traditionally very strong in JNU and the recent entry of BAPSA has eroded a considerable portion of their base, weaning away a large section of Dalits, Adivasis, OBCs and minority students to its fold. In a short span of time, BAPSA has grown “quite strong” and posed a “serious challenge” to the Left by mobilising “oppressed” students. This compelled AISA and SFI—which were the arch-rivals for decades— to team up last year in JNUSU polls. AISA and SFI, in their defence, argued said that they had forged “unity in principle” to “defend JNU” from the Hindutva forces. BAPSA, by contrast, argued that only the “unity of the oppressed” can uproot Brahmanism, politically, socially and culturally. This year, DSF, former breakaway group of SFI, has become the third ally of Left alliance, which, many argue, points to their shrinking social-base. In the Left circles, anxieties were seen in the wake of BAPSA’s “brilliant” performance last year when its presidential candidate Rahul Sonpimple finished second and gave neck to neck fight to Mohit Pandey, the elected president and joint candidate of the Left alliance. This year too, Shabana looked confident during the Presidential debate on Wednesday night and is seen as a formidable presidential candidate to both Left alliance candidate Geeta Kumari and the Right-wing ABVP’s Nidhi Tripathi. AISF has fielded Aparajitha Raja as its presidential candidate after its talks over seat-sharing had failed with AISA and SFI. The entry of Raja, the daughter of senior CPI leader D. Raja, to the electoral fray has further complicated the situation. Independent presidential candidate Farooque Alam, differently-abled, spoke well in the presidential debate and is likely to considerable “secular” votes.

BAPSA’s criticism of the Left is due to several reasons. One of them is Left’s failure in addressing institutional discrimination faced by oppressed students- their failure in implementing reservation, particularly at faculty level, reducing the interview marks to 10, fighting the battle against UGC-Gazette and “seat-cut”. “Look at how the Left has responded to the Right-wing assault around the discourse of ‘national and anti-national’ after the February 9 incident. It has given series of lectures on nationalism but the real issues of institutional discrimination, caste question and social composition of students and teachers were not discussed. Moreover, the speakers from marginalised sections were ignored in those lecture-series”, rued Shabana Ali.

Many people who have heard her speak, say that Shabana appeared confident and nowhere did she fumble or make mistakes. Nor was she found to have contradicted herself or organisation’s line. Her style was neither dull nor was it too much rhetorical, they added. “She is self-assured, mature and theoretically-sharp,” argues an activist from BAPSA. During my

discussion with Shabana soon after her speech at Chandrabhaga the next morning, she heard my questions patiently and answered them with arguments and logic.

Shabana is a Bengali Muslim but her early life and schooling was done at Varanasi where as her family moved when she was just one-year old child. Her family was originally from Shantipur, famous for handloom saree and at the time of Partition, they had to migrate to Medinipur. The flames of Partition approached her family and her father's close relative lost her finger in communal violence. Another negative impact of Partition was the loss of their traditional occupation that was dying threads (dhaga rangne ka kam). This all contributed to their woes and her family fell on hard times.

In spite of difficult times, her father managed to complete his Masters. He became the music teacher (vocal) at the prestigious Rajghat Besant School (Varanasi) where Shabana did her schooling and received good education. Established in 1927 next to the river Ganga, it is based on the vision of philosopher J. Krishnamurti. Recalling her schooling days, in a discussion with me at Tapti Hostel next morning where she is a resident, Shabana said that "Since my father was a teacher there, my fees were waived. Otherwise, I could never have afforded to study there."

The sprawling campus of JNU makes door-to-door campaign and addressing students in classes and Dhabas is a tough job within a short time. That is why she invited me to talk over breakfast at her hostel. While she talked with me, she was getting constant calls from her friends. She also made calls to wake up her friends, asking them to get ready. "You can talk with me till my friends come here and we all begin our campaign today", she said and hinted that I should pose all the remaining questions as early as possible. She then held my cup and went into the hostel mess to bring another cup of tea.

Our conversation resumed and she said that at the Rajghat Besant School, there were not many Muslim students. This has to do with deprivation of Muslim community. As several scholars have shown, Partition had a very negative impact on Indian Muslims. A large number of the middle-class and well-off Muslims migrated to Pakistan and those who chose India as their home were treated with suspicion and made to face institutionalized discriminations at the hands of post-colonial state. Anti-Muslim communal violence with the collusion of police and administration has given them little time to think about their welfare.

Another influence on Shabana's life is her parents. Her father Siraj Ali, who learnt vocal music from the son of Bade Ghulam Ali, has recently retired from Rajghat Besant School. Her class 12th-pass mother Ashia Khatoon is still warden there. Shabana acknowledged that her father gave her freedom to explore her potential. He also gave her two elder sisters liberal education and one of her sister has studied fine arts. When I asked him over the phone if he had ever objected to the fact that Shabana was contesting election in JNU which recently courted controversy, her father Siraj Ali said, "She is free (swatantra) to do whatever she wants. I should not put hurdle (rukawat) in her way". He also told me that he had never imposed any religious dogmas on her children and for him a true religious mind was "free from all conditioning and religious dogmas". Her mother, on the other hand, inspired Shabana to fight against injustice. "My mother has a big role in my life the way I think. Since my childhood, she used to say if there is any wrong thing (ghalat cheez), you should speak against this". Shabana owes her spirit to struggle against wrongs to her mother.

Since her childhood, Shabana got involved in social services. She used to teach poor students and distribute clothes among them, as her father said. That is why he did not feel surprised when he heard that Shabana was contesting JNU polls. Her candidature in JNU polls is the continuation of her journey from social service to active politics, his father added.

For higher education, Shabana went back to her native state and got enrolled in B.A. (Social Work) at Visva-Bharati University founded by Asia's first Nobel laureate and poet-philosopher Tagore. It was at Visva-Bharati that the young Shabana experienced discrimination. "I realised at Visva-Bharati that people there were patronizing Dalits, Muslims and lower castes instead of addressing their problems. The marginalized students were contemptuously called sonar tokdo (the piece of gold), which means that they should be handled gently because they come from the lower strata of the society. The elites there were willing to give us favour but they were reluctant to recognise our rights". She further said that the stigma attached with the subaltern identity was so powerful that no one wanted to disclose their identity of being SCs or STs.

Historically, Bengal was one of the first regions to launch movements for social reforms in the colonial period. But the discrimination faced by Shabana and other oppressed students points to their limitations. Since these reforms were led mostly by upper castes, they were reluctant to take up the caste question. In post-colonial India too, West Bengal saw three decades of political rule by progressive regimes but the question of caste and religion were not confronted.

The experience of Shabana brings to light the horrible life Dalits, OBCs, Muslims and others have to live at each and every moment. “The Bengali elites used to call us chhote log and neech

jaat when I speak colloquial Bengali and used to say pani (water) instead of jal. The way one cuts fish, one is singled out who is a Muslim and who is a Hindu,” said Shabana.

When asked about the role of the Left in addressing the Muslim issue, she did not appreciate the bearers of the red flag. Note that a controversy was generated in 2005 after the Prime Minister-constituted high-level inquiry headed by Justice Sachar on the state of Muslims revealed that the Muslims of West Bengal were in a bad situation. Following this, the credibility of the Left front government as a “champion” of secularism and “minority rights” was severely questioned. Sachar report and the state violence in Nandigram and Singur on people, many of them being Muslims, suddenly alienated Muslims from the Left parties and they shifted their support to Mamata Banerjee’s Trinamool Congress, voting her to power.

Shabana’s mother’s family also had staunch supporters and activists of the Left parties but they, too, felt alienated. Why did Muslims leave the Left parties? To this, Shabana replied “The Left has a language of poverty but not the language of dignity. Moreover, the Left has failed to accept that Dalits do not get adequate dignity even if they become rich. Her major disquiet with the Left in Bengal is that they suppress Muslim identity. “There is a pressure to underplay your identity. There is a pressure to be secular and one has to say that I am a Muslim but I do not look like a Muslim.”

If the Left has failed to address cultural issues, is it not true that they have worked for the material uplift? To this, she replied in negative. She began to talk about her own experience as a researcher when she did field work in some villages of West Bengal. “One could easily locate the Muslim areas because of poverty.”

But, is the condition of all Muslims same? What about the divide between upper caste Muslims (Ashraf) and lower caste Muslims (Pasmenda)? Her background from the upper-caste Shaikh Muslim has also been made an issue in the ongoing campaign by BAPSA’s detractors. To this, she said that diluting the question of caste in Muslim society would be hiding the reality. But at the same time, one should not forget that Muslims, both upper castes and lower castes, do face discrimination because of their religious identity. She gave an example from her own life to persuade me. “When I travel in a train I find people’s behaviour suddenly changes once T.T.E. spells out my name and disclose my identity as a Muslim.” She gave another example of a recent experience at JNU when she could not get rid of a sense of fear. “I conducted a programme on the last August 15 in JNU and unlike other occasions I felt a lot of pressure. The pressure was not to say anything that sparked a new controversy. Since I am a Muslim I was extra-cautious.”

The 15th August programme that she conducted drew a good number of Dalit and Muslim students. Her chances of winning the election will largely depend on how much she manages to get the support of Dalits and Muslims. When asked if her candidature is yet another attempt to forge a unity between Dalits and Muslims, she replied that both Dalits and Muslims share a lot as far as their social conditions are concerned. “Once I did a field work in Bengal, I realised that both Dalits and Muslims have similar conditions and both shared the problem of poverty. One should not forget that a large number of Muslim converts were also Dalits. That is why the unity between two oppressed communities Dalits and Muslims is natural. Similarly, I have several friends in BAPSA who are Dalits and easily strike a chord with them.”

Speaking more about her association with BAPSA activists, she said the activists of BAPSA are struggling as my father did for getting higher education. "My father gave me good education and provided me better facilities but he himself had to struggle because he was the first among his family to strive for higher education. Whenever I interact with BAPSA activists, it reminds me of the struggle of my father and creates a bond with them." One of Shabana's friends in BAPSA from her TISS days is Rahul Sonpimple and like most of BAPSA's activists, he is the first from his family to reach out to university. Rahul's father used to pull rickshaw in Mumbai.

After Visva-Bharati she went to TISS (Tata School of Social Sciences, Mumbai) for her Masters (Social Work) and her MPhil (Social Sciences). It is at TISS that her understanding about caste developed both in the class-room and outside of it. "TISS did provide me a great opportunity and I became aware and sensitive to the caste question. My specialization in Masters was in Dalit and Tribal studies and I became aware about their problems". Gradually, Shabana's interest in politics, particularly the politics for the marginalized communities, grew and she found herself involved in several anti-caste struggles. "She was very active at TISS when the beef and Mahishasura festival controversy [depicted as a demon by Brahminical text while considered as a subaltern icon by a large section of lower castes and Adivasi] was in news. She was part of an intellectual campaign at TISS for the right to eat beef and reading the myths from Dalit-Bahujan perspective", recalls Joy Lakra, an Adivasi from West Bengal and class-mate of Shabana at TISS. But her deep interests in paintings and her commitment to anti-caste movements made her study the representation of Dalits in paintings in her MPhil dissertation at TISS. She remembered that caste stigma was so powerful that both non-Dalits and Dalits do not want to draw sketches, highlighting the caste questions. In her PhD at JNU, she is researching on a similar topic, the representation of Dalits in paintings and sculptures. When asked to discuss about her work, she said the oppressed communities are not only exploited and humiliated but their culture are appropriated and they are misrepresented in arts as well. "Take the example of recent installation of B.R. Ambedkar's statue in the JNU Central Library. The newly-installed Ambedkar's statue is smaller in size than Nehru's."

Her activism further intensified after she joined JNU as a PhD scholar in 2016. Since her friends from TISS were already active in BAPSA, she joined it and found it to be a "great" platform. "Rahul and Bhupali were my class-mates in TISS and we were involved in anti-caste movements there. Their association with BAPSA drew me closer to it as well as its anti-caste ideology", she said. Her admission to JNU happened at the time of the agitation for justice for Rohith Vemula and she was at the forefront of struggle. JNU, like Hyderabad Central University, was also at the forefront of struggles against institutional caste discrimination and this gave her an opportunity to get directly involved with political movements. BAPSA leadership, realising her potential, made her its co-convener. Who knew that she would become its presidential candidate in such a short time.

Since elections are a stressful time she listens to music, particularly A.R. Rahman's songs to de-stress herself. When she gets time from her activism, she goes back to her old hobby of drawing sketches. Reading books and watching movies are her favorites. The last movie she watched but did not like was Lipstick Under My Burkha (2017). "This has stereotyped Muslim men", she said. Meanwhile her central-panel candidates Subodh Kunwer (vice-president), Karam Bidyanath Khuman (general secretary) and Vinod Kumar (joint secretary) came to Tapti Hostel and asked her to accompany them for the election campaign. Our discussion ended there and all four went off on a motorcycle and a scooty.

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